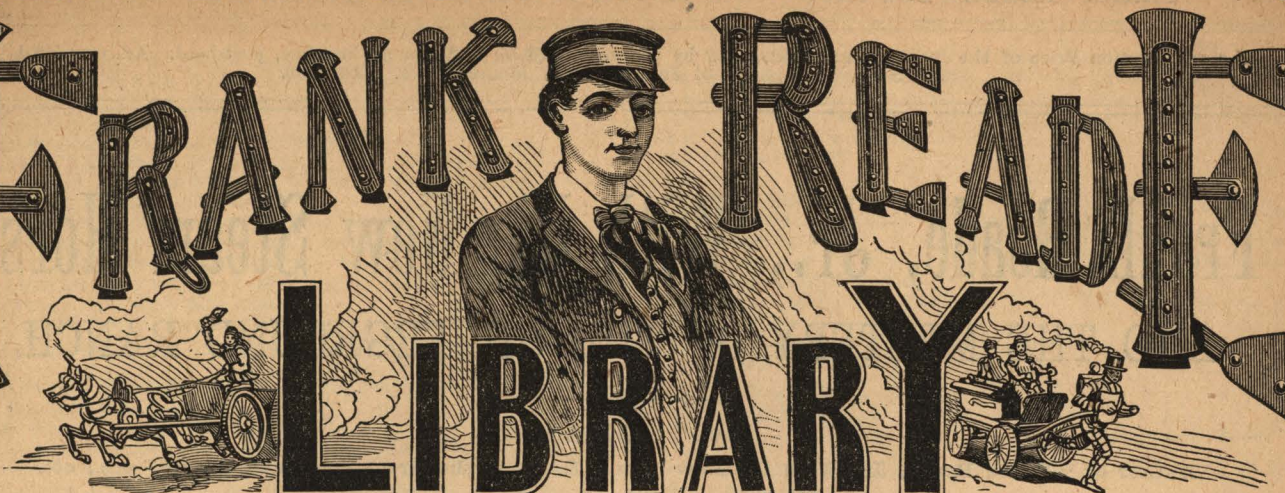


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Entered as Second Class Matter at the New York, N. Y., Post Office, October 5, 1892.

No. 10. { COMPLETE. }

FRANK TOUSEY, PUBLISHER, 34 & 36 NORTH MOORE STREET, NEW YORK.
New York, November 26, 1892.

{ PRICE
5 CENTS. }

Vol. I

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Frank Reade, Jr.,

WITH HIS NEW STEAM HORSE And the Mystery of the Underground Ranch.

By "NONAME."



A loud cry of alarm went up, and a tall youth on a mustang was seen riding furiously up from the direction of the Wiggin ranch. "Thunder and guns!" gasped Wiggin, with pale face. "Sumthin's wrong. That's my boy, Al, an' he's as white as a sheet."

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Frank Reade, Jr., With His New Steam Horse

AND THE MYSTERY OF THE UNDERGROUND RANCH.

By "NONAME,"

Author of "Frank Reade, Jr., With His New Steam Horse in the Great American Desert," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

A PECULIAR MESSAGE.

READESTOWN was a thriving little city in the United States of some ten or twelve thousand inhabitants, and noted the world over as the birth-place and home of Frank Reade, Jr., one of the greatest inventors the sun ever shone upon.

The town had been founded by and named after the elder Reade, who was a man of great wealth made out of his famous inventions of various kinds.

Extensive shops for the manufacture of his inventions had been built by Frank Reade, Jr., who had succeeded his father.

These gave employment to many skilled workmen and learned savants. Master mechanics and machinists from all over the world visited the Reade shops.

Foremost among their most wonderful inventions had been the Steam Man.

After this had come to destruction in the bottom of a deep gorge in the wild West, Frank Reade, Jr., had thought of constructing another Man.

But an idea struck him to change the plan of his machine a little, and he decided upon the lines of a horse for the next.

A Steam Man, why not a Steam Horse? Friends looked dubious, and reminded Frank that he had four legs to manipulate instead of two, which would by no means be so easy.

But the young inventor only smiled, and went to work secretly to draw his plans.

The result was the Steam Horse, a most wonderful invention.

The fame of the Steam Horse extended all over the world.

Frank made several successful trips to the West, and had in mind now another, which promised no end of exciting adventures and experiences.

It will be the purpose of this book to describe those experiences, but first, for the benefit of such of our readers as may not have read the previous stories, let us attempt a brief description of the Steam Horse.

Frank had constructed the Horse of plates of steel, neatly jointed and riveted together.

In the body of the Horse was the boiler, and its chest held the furnace, with a heavy iron door to close it up.

From the Horse's shoulders, and connecting with the various shoulder, knee and postern joints were small rods made to work on shoulders, and connected with a cylinder upon each wagon shaft which carried a driving-rod.

The hind legs of the Horse were equipped in like manner.

When the throttle was closed and brakes applied the Horse could be brought to a standstill just like any good, docile animal of the equine species.

But the opening of the throttle set all the delicate parts to work, and the Horse would gallop slow or fast, just as the driver desired.

The throttle valve was controlled by the lower jaw of the Horse, which carried a bit and reins.

Between the ears of the Horse the steam whistle was located, and from the Horse's nostrils came jets of steam from the escape valves.

The saddle held the steam register and indicator. This furnishes a meager description of the Horse. Now let us describe briefly the wagon.

It was an iron affair, with four wheels, a high dasher in front, and coal bunkers upon the sides.

Upon these coal bunkers good bunks were arranged, which could be used in the daytime as seats. There was also in the front part of the wagon a spacious locker for the storing away of provisions, ammunition and any articles of necessary sort.

But the most interesting feature was the top and sides of the wagon, which were of fine plates of steel, and made to shut up or down like the top of a roll-top desk or a steel door curtain.

When these were up, the interior of the wagon became a comparatively impregnable fortress, for the curtains were bullet proof.

In the lattice work were loop-holes to fire through in case of the attack of an enemy.

The hubs of the wheels were also so arranged that sharp knives of steel could be placed upon them.

In fact, the Steam Horse and wagon was made with the purpose of being able to resist the attack of any foe not armed with cannon.

In this wonderful invention Frank Reade, Jr., was about to undertake one of the most perilous trips of his career.

A week previous he had received a certainly very eccentric but characteristic message.

It came through the mail, and was inclosed in an envelope of buckskin all ornamented with fringe.

Frank cut it open and drew forth a lengthy document of sheepskin, upon which was written in an irregular hand, the following:

"COLUMBIAN CITY, NEW MEXICO,

"18th July, 18—

"TO MISTHER FRANK READE, JR.

"DEER SUR—We've heern tell uv yew an' uv yure Steam Hoss. Now we, the honest, law-abidin' citizens of Columbian City, hain't no idee of trespassin' on yure good nature, but we are in a powerful sight of trubble, an' we kan't think of anybody who kin help us as well as yew kin. Thar's a pizen gang of robbers out yere who will sorter pursist in strappin' every pilgrim they kin git in their grip. We hev tried tew fight 'em, but they fit tew hard fer us. Now, we reckon yu're jist ther man tew clean ther gang out, an' if you'll do it fer us we'll raise a publick subscripshun paper an' git yew a heap ov goodwill, if not much money. Now, we're trying ter indoose Eastern gents ter cum hyar an' invest ther coin in Western homes, but our buildin' lots won't sell fer a buckin' cayuse until arter we kin clean out Sid Rollins an' his gang. Ther mean cusses hev threatened ter exterminate ther hull community of us. Come on, good friend, an' we'll reseeve yer inter ther bosoms of our families, like a brother, an' turn out a solid county fer ye if ye ever run fer Congress. If ye don't answer this prayer of honest people there'll be a funeral fer every one of us before two months. Tellygraf me right back if yew will come, an' my man will be at Yuba City tew git it an' fetch it one hundred miles over hyar. Fer ther love of God, cum tew our rescue. I've writ twicet tew ther President, but I kin reckon he's tew busy wth ther tariff, er flirtn' with old Queen Victory, tew pay any heed tew sich poor devils as we uns. Be sure an' answer to orct.

"Yours on ther square,

"CAL WIGGINS,

"Postmaster, Mayor, Undertaker, Board of Aldermen, and Justice of ther Peace of Columbian City, New Mexico."

Frank's inclination upon reading this peculiar communication was to laugh over the eccentricities of the writer, whom he regarded as a mild crank, and consign it to the waste basket.

But he happened to think of a friend who had traveled all over New Mexico, and knew it well.

There was a possibility that the writer of the unique epistle was in dead earnest.

If so, then there was no good reason why his message should not be respectfully answered.

So Frank concluded to send for his traveled friend and ask his advice.

Accordingly, he touched a bell, and in answer, a door flew open and a short, good-natured and comical looking negro appeared on the threshold.

"Here, Pomp," said Frank, "take this note to Mr. Frank Harper."

"A'right, sah," replied the coon, ducking his head. "Whar am I ebber to fin' de gent?"

"Don't you know? Mr. Harper's office is in the brick building one street below here."

"I knows, sah. A'right, sah!"

Pomp disappeared. The darcy was an old and faithful employee of the Reades.

Just as he was going out of the yard of the machine works, he ran into an individual who was coming in.

So sudden and forcible was the collision, that both sat down very forcibly.

"Tare an' 'ounds!" yelled the red-faced Irishman, for such the other was, "ye've nigh knocked the loife out av me. As shure as me name is Barney O'Shea, it's the raygur."

"Golly! It am dat 'fishmans."

Both scrambled to their feet and faced each other.

Barney O'Shea was a genuine type of the Tipperary Celt.

His comical mug was indicative of good nature, and his dancing blue eyes were always full of fun.

Barney was also an old servant of the Reades.

He was returning from a journey to the "ould sod," and in entering the yard suddenly had collided with Pomp.

The two servitors were the best of friends, though ever engaged in perpetrating jokes upon each other.

In this practice it was hard to say which got the best of it.

They were delighted to see each other now, however, and Barney cried:

"Whurroo! It's moighty glad I am to see yez onct more, naygur. Wud yez cum to me arms."

They embraced and then Pomp asked:

"Golly! yo' am jes' about as fat as eber, I'ish. Did yo' hab a good time ober de big pond?"

"Begorra, yez kin bet I did! Oh, all the servate girruls an' ther foine byes I see in the city av Dublin."

"Dat mus' hab been drefful nice!"

"Begorra, ye bet it was that. Shure, wan day I was out in the Dublin Park, thet's a foine place."

"Am dat so?"

"Bejabers, I said so. Well, shure I was a sthrolling along when I met a foine girrul, an' she had a pretty posy in her buzzom. Shure I have one in me button-hole here just loike it."

Pomp saw what appeared to be a fine bouquet in Barney's coat lapel.

"Shure that's foine shmelling," sez I. 'Yes, it is,' said she; 'wud yez moind a bit av a schmell,' sez I, 'not a bit,' said she, troth, an' down I bent me nose an' schmelt, an' be me fowl, av yez will schmell av this ye'll get the same deloight I did, barrin' the gurrul's pooty eyes!"

Pomp bent forward and pressed his fat nose against the bouquet.

The next moment he was sorry for it.

A terrific douche of ammonia, strong and bitter, flashed into his nostrils. For a moment the darky thought he was dying.

But ammonia does not kill, and Pomp recovered, to find his tormentor had vanished, though his mocking laugh could be heard far down the yard.

"Fo' de Lor' sakes!" he grunted, as he rushed away upon his errand. "I'll jes' cum square wif dat 'fishman, jes' so suah as mah name am Pomp."

CHAPTER II.

STARTING FOR THE WEST.

FRANK READE, JR., had not long to wait. A short while later the office door opened and a tall man with iron-gray side-whiskers came in.

"Ah, Frank, how are you?" he said, cheerily. "Glad to see you."

"The same," replied Frank.

"You sent for me?"

"Yes—thank you for coming so promptly. I wish to ask you a few questions."

"Proceed."

"You have traveled in New Mexico?"

"Pretty much."

"Do you know much about a place called Columbian City?"

Frank Harper gave a start.

"I should say I did."

"What sort of a place is it?"

"It is a struggling settlement of a few hundred souls. The people are plain and uncouth, but a more hospitable place I never struck in my life."

"Do you know a man there named Cal Wiggin?"

"Wiggin? I should say I did. One of the bluffest, best-hearted men in the world."

"Ah! I am glad to hear it."

Harper looked questioningly at Frank.

"But why all these questions?" he asked. "Do you know Wiggin?"

"This will explain to you," said Frank, handing the buckskin letter to Harper.

With wonderment depicted upon his face, the lawyer took it and read it through.

Frank watched him narrowly the while.

When he had finished, the young inventor said:

"Well, what do you think of it?"

Harper drew a deep breath.

"I will tell you," he said, earnestly; "those people are in great peril. Sid Rollins is a fiend, and will exterminate them, as he threatens. This is a cry of distress from a remote and endangered community, and I regret that I am not able to go myself to their aid."

Frank's face was serious.

"You believe that?" he asked.

"I know it."

"But why should they send for me? Why not send for government aid?"

"Ah, they have more confidence in you. Government aid is slow. They have heard of some of the exploits of your Steam Horse near them, and they have concluded that you are the friend to seek."

Frank sat silent for a moment.

Harper arose and paced the floor. Suddenly he paused:

"I do not wish to influence you in any way, Frank!" he said, "but if you have any philanthropic propensities you would like to gratify you will find no more worthy subjects."

"You believe that?"

"I do!"

Frank brought his fist down on the table with great force.

"That settles it!" he cried, in his bluff, hearty fashion. "I will answer this appeal at once. I have never refused a worthy call for help from an oppressed individual. As long as I live my inventions shall work for the cause of the just."

"A noble resolution!" cried Harper. "You will get your reward!"

A few moments later the lawyer left the office.

Then Frank wrote a telegram:

"To CAL WIGGIN, YUBA CITY STATION:

"Keep a stiff upper lip. I am coming to help you."

"FRANK READE, JR."

For two days after this the greatest excitement reigned in and about the machine works.

It was rumored that Frank Reade, Jr., was about to undertake another famous trip, and everybody was interested greatly.

The Steam Horse required some little repairing from the effects of the former trip.

But this was speedily done, and in less than a day the Horse was ready.

Barney and Pomp were to accompany Frank, and they were as usual overjoyed at the prospect.

A special train was chartered to transport the Horse to Yuba City.

From there the trip was to be made overland to Columbian City.

A guide was to meet them at Yuba, and with these arrangements all completed, and the Horse aboard the train, the start was made.

The special whirled away across the Texas plains at a sixty-mile gait.

One fine morning the train was side-tracked at Yuba City.

This was a small collection of adobe huts, and the inhabitants were mostly Mexicans and half-breeds.

The Steam Horse was quickly unloaded. Skilled mechanics had been brought along to put the invention together.

After the Horse was constructed, Barney built a fire in the furnace, water was put in the boiler and steam was got up.

The Steam Horse took a trial trip through the streets of Yuba City.

So astonished and terrified were the natives that all ran into their houses and fastened the doors.

This amused Barney and Pomp immensely.

At length all was declared in readiness to take leave of Yuba City.

As Cal Wiggin had agreed, a representative was on hand from Columbian City.

This was a mere boy, who said he was a son of Wiggin and gave his name as Oscar.

He was a slender lad, with thin but intelligent features, and long yellow hair which fell down upon his shoulders.

He was illy clad in loose fitting buckskin, could ride like a Centaur and throw a lasso well for a youth of his age.

Frank was much interested in the lad and asked him many questions.

"I reckon ye won't git thar none too soon!" declared Oscar.

"Why?" asked Frank.

"Wall, thet pizen reptile, Sid Rollins, sed he was goin' to wipe out Columbian City an' they wuz expectin' him when I left."

"Heavens!" exclaimed Frank, "then we will need to hurry."

"I reckon so!"

"How far is it to your place?"

"About a hundred miles, I reckon."

"How quickly can you go with your pony?"

"I reckon on a pinch I kin do it in a day."

"Isn't that pretty good riding?"

"Yas, it is. But thar's many a hoss on thier range kin do it."

"How do you make a living in your part of the country?"

"Oh, we hev to scratch gravel," said the boy with a laugh. "There's many a one don't make anythin'. But we hev stock an' sheep on ther range, when they ain't stole by Rollins. It's pooty hard lines, stranger!"

"Well, I should say so!" said Frank, sympathetically. "You would probably do better if it was not for Rollins?"

The boy's pinched face brightened.

"Dad thinks he could make a fortune," he cried. "It's ther best grazing land south of the desert line."

"Well," said Frank, resolutely, "I will do all I can to defeat your enemies!"

"Dad said he knew you would!" replied the boy, confidently.

"Tell me of your family," asked Frank. "Have you brothers and sisters?"

"Yas!" replied Oscar. "I've three of 'em an' one sister. There's Seth an' Al an' Jake. Seth, he's pretty smart; Al, he's allus a study—up some gold mine; an' Jake, he ain't very bright—kinder sickly like. Then thar's Sis—oh, I tell ye, she ain't like ther rest of us!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Frank. "In what way?"

"Oh, she's a born lady!" replied Oscar, with simplicity. "She talks beautiful an' she's so gentle like an' sweet thet Dad calls her an

angel sent to him from Heaven. Ma is a heap fond of Sis and so's all the rest of us!"

"It is nice to have such a sister!" cried Frank, with interest.

"Deed it is, sir, to us poor people. But we don't think anything of ourselves when Rollins comes to attack us, we only think what would become of Sis."

Frank felt a tingling in his veins.

"If thes coundrel dares to harm a hair of her head!" he cried, heatedly, "he shall pay for it with his life."

The Steam Horse kept on over the prairie at a slow gallop, in pace with the tireless pony of Oscar's.

Had it been possible to have allowed the Horse to take its swiftest gait, Columbian City would have been reached in quicker time.

But it was necessary to have a guide, so the Horse was kept along at a moderate pace.

Mile after mile of the even plain was covered.

As the start had been made at the hour of noon night came on before half the distance had been covered.

Oscar was willing to ride on in the darkness, but Frank knew the risk to which he would be subjecting the Steam Horse and declined to do so.

It was therefore necessary to camp for the night.

The Steam Horse was halted in a convenient place near a bubbling spring.

Barney had collected enough dried grass and peat to make a fire, when a startled cry came from Oscar.

The boy rushed into camp with a white face and excited manner.

"Oh, Mister Reade!" he cried in distress, "we're surely done fer. Thar's a hull gang of Sid Rollins' men out on ther perrairy thar, an' thar ain't any doubt but they hev cum out to cut us off."

Frank was instantly upon his feet.

"Where are they?" he cried.

"Out yender!" shouted the boy, pointing out on the plain.

And there, plainly visible to all, was a cavalcade of horsemen bearing down upon the Steam Horse.

Oscar affirmed positively that they were Rollins' men.

There was no one to dispute this. It was accepted as a fact.

At once preparations were made for defense.

All sprang into the wagon but Oscar. The lad clung to his pony's back and would have ridden away, but Frank cried:

"Hold on, my boy! Don't attempt that. It's too risky. Come into the wagon."

Oscar slipped from his pony's back.

The little animal, faithfully trained, cantered away out upon the prairie to graze.

It would be a smart foe who would catch the little animal now.

All were in the wagon when the cavalcade galloped up in the gloom and reined in their horses.

They were within speaking distance of the Steam Horse, and one of them came forward.

"Hello!" he shouted. "Who in the name of Satan are ye?"

Frank made reply:

"I am Frank Reade, Jr., and this is my Steam Horse. Who are you?"

A mocking laugh came back.

"Wall, I'm Sid Rollins, and I'm the wickedest man in New Mexico!"

"Ah, indeed!" said Frank, coolly. "Then you are the man I want to see."

CHAPTER III.

A BATTLE WITH THE OUTLAWS.

"Ye want to see me, eh?" growled the ruffian.

"I do!"

"What do you want to see me about?"

"You are an outlaw and a thief. I demand that you surrender yourself to the law. If not, I shall endeavor to bring you to justice."

Frank spoke clearly, firmly and forcibly.

For a moment the prairie outlaw made no response.

Then he leaned back and guffawed in a most violent fashion.

"Well, I swow!" he cried. "My young turkey cock, ye've a mighty pile of brass, I'll allow, but ye'll have to look out that yer pin feathers ain't plucked afore ye git through. So ye think Sid Rollins will give in to ye, eh? Haw! haw! haw! that's the best joke I've heern tell hereabouts."

"Oh, he's an awful man!" whispered Oscar as he stood shivering beside Frank. "Don't get him too mad, sir."

But Frank made no reply.

"Spare your cheap talk, Sid Rollins. I've dealt with men like you before."

"Oh, ye have, eh? An' ye've cum out hyar with that Steam Hoss to fetch me ter terms, eh? Why, I'll sink yew an' yer Hoss in Wild river."

"Take care."

"What off?"

"There is a little risk in venturing to attack the Steam Horse."

"Oh, there is, eh?"

"Yes."

"Wall, by jinks, mebbe ye mean that for a kind of a challenge?"

"If you choose!"

"Wall, I'll take it. But fust let me axe ye if Cal Wiggin didn't send for ye?"

"He did!"

An oath leaped from Rollins' lips.

"He's a fool an' a coward!" he cried. "Upon my word I'll sink him an' his hull family fer that."

"Not if I can help it," cried Frank, sternly.

"Mebbe ye think ye kin help it?"

"I know that I can."

"How?"

"Just tackle me and see."

"Oh, sir!" cried the shivering Oscar, "what shall we do if he attacks us?"

"That is just what I want him to do," said Frank, coolly. "It will be a sorry day for him."

"Oh, but I reckon he's an awful bloodthirsty man."

"Well, so am I when I am dealing with his kind," said Frank, ironically. "I hope to madden him into attacking the Steam Horse. It is my desire."

It was evident that Frank was to have his desire gratified.

The villain had been giving orders to his men.

"Charge on ther cussed fools!" he yelled. "Don't ye leave one on 'em alive."

With a wild whoop like a gang of wild Comanches, the outlaw gang rode down upon the Steam Horse.

But Frank was already at the dasher and had the reins.

"Now, Barney and Pomp," he cried, steadily, "you know what to do."

"A'right, Marse Frank!"

"You bet we will, Misther Frank!"

Both caught up Winchester repeaters and rushed to the loopholes.

A volley was fired at that moment by the outlaws.

The bullets spattered upon the steel screen like hail stones.

Not one penetrated into the wagon.

Oscar caught the spirit of the moment and also sprang to a loophole with his rifle.

The Steam Horse was galloping across the prairie in the gloom, followed by the mounted outlaws.

Volley after volley the gang fired at the wagon.

But the occupants of the wagon now began to get in their work.

Barney and Pomp worked their repeaters rapidly.

The result was that the pursuers began to drop, one by one, from their saddles.

In vain they tried to outfoot the Steam Horse.

Frank kept just rifle shot ahead of them, and increased or diminished speed just as they did.

Of course, the advantage was vastly with the Steam Horse.

Indeed, it would have been possible in time for the good shots in the wagon to have literally exterminated the whole gang of outlaws.

Apparently the villain, Rollins, realized this well, for he changed his tactics all of a sudden.

The outlaws suddenly changed their course and disappeared in the gloom.

They had abandoned the chase.

Satisfied of this Frank brought the Steam Horse to a stop.

Not one of the outlaw band was to be seen.

Far out on the prairie was a red light. It was the camp-fire built by Barney yet burning.

"Bogorra, I reckon thim divils have got enough of the Steam Horse fer onct," cried Barney.

"I 'clar fo' goodness, if dat ain' a fac'," agreed Pomp.

Little Oscar Wiggin was beside himself with delight.

He began to regard the Steam Horse as a most wonderful invention, and Frank Reade, Jr., an infallible general.

"I think we will go back to camp now," cried Frank. "I don't believe they will attack us again to-night."

"Bad cess to the omadhouns, shure it will be bad for thim if they do!" cried Barney with force.

Accordingly the Steam Horse was sent back to the camp.

Arrived there Barney went for more fuel, while Pomp began to cook the supper.

They were right in the belief that the outlaws would not attempt another attack. They did not again show up.

"I reckon they know when they've got enuff," declared Oscar, sagely.

While the party were preparing the meal suddenly a loud whinny was heard, and up to the spot galloped Oscar's pony.

The spirits of all were high as they partook of the evening meal.

No attempt was made now to disguise their camp, and it was arranged that Barney should stay on guard half the night and Pomp the other half.

Until a late hour all sat up.

During the evening Barney brought out a genuine Irish fiddle and began to regale the others with Irish airs.

Pomp, not to be outdone, brought out his banjo and gave some fine old plantation songs.

Little Oscar Wiggin, who had never heard the like before, listened with interest and great delight.

"Beavers an' wildcats!" he exclaimed, "I've heard Sam Billings play a jewsharp, but it don't compare with that music."

Everybody laughed heartily at this.

The night passed without incident of material interest.

In the morning all were astir at an early hour.

Frank was anxious to get started, and had all on hand to an early breakfast.

Soon the Steam Horse was once more on its way across the plain.

O-car rode ahead on his pony, and thus mile after mile was covered.

At the end of thirty miles a rest was called. It was yet an hour from noon, so it was reckoned that they would reach their destination by one o'clock.

Once more under way the miles were rapidly covered.

Finally a distant line of mountain ranges broke upon the horizon.

"Hooray!" cried little Oscar, excitedly. "We're most there!"

A timber belt was seen a few miles ahead, and a rich tract of country.

"There it is!" cried the lad, rising in the stirrups.

Columbian City was revealed to be an indiscriminate gathering of rude log huts and adobe houses.

Its location was near the edge of the belt of timber and was quite picturesque and sightly.

But there was yet a desolation and gloom upon the country which precluded all possible attraction.

"There's dad's ranch!" cried Oscar, pointing to a long series of rambling buildings in a large yard fenced in with high boards.

It was the most pretentious of all the places.

It was evident that the Wiggins were the nabobs of the place.

Frank therefore held the Steam Horse down toward the ranch.

In the yard a number of cowboys were engaged in casting a wild steer with ropes. The act was an exciting and dangerous one.

They ceased it at sight of the Steam Horse.

All of the townspeople, aroused by the whistle which the Steam Horse gave, rushed to the ranch gates to view the great object of wonderment, the coming of which, however, they were prepared for.

And now from the ranch yard there advanced a man in herder's costume, with sombrero of enormous width—a man of remarkable physique and great markedness of features.

Instinctively Frank guessed who he was.

He was no other than Cal Wiggin, and the young inventor saw at once that Harper's estimate of the man was correct.

Wiggin was a great, bluff, noble-hearted man.

He extended one hand, saying in a voice which was like deep thunder:

"Hello, Mr. Frank Reade, Jr.! Blow me, I'm powerful glad to see ye—dang me if I ain't!"

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Wiggin," said Frank, pleasantly.

"So that is ther Steam Hoss?" cried the ranchman, gazing at the invention with the deepest of interest.

"Wall, I swar, it is a good un, ain't it. How in tarnation did ye ever do it, pard? Condemn me, if it ain't a big brain ye've got to master sich a thing."

Frank minutely described the Steam Horse to Wiggin, who listened with deep interest.

Frank began to be more and more favorably impressed with the ranchman.

Having finished the inspection of the Steam Horse Frank asked:

"Well, what about Sid Rollins?"

"Hain't seen him for two days," declared Wiggin, "but I keep my eyes open, fer he might turn up at any minnit."

"That is wise," agreed Frank. "He is a bad customer."

Wiggin listened to an account of the struggle with Rollins' men. He shrugged his shoulders and said:

"I reckon Rollins will find that he ain't fightin' women now. Ye've cum just in the right time, Mister Reade, an' no mistakin' of it."

"Well, here I am, and I am ready to help you!" declared Frank. But—

He did not finish the sentence.

At that moment there was a tremendous uproar in the direction of the village streets.

Frank and Wiggin turned and gazed thither to behold a thrilling sight.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ABDUCTION.

THE sight beheld by those in the ranch-yard was a terrible one.

The crash of firearms was heard, the yells and cries of combatants, and then into the air there shot a long, mighty column of red flame.

"My God!" gasped Frank Reade, Jr. "What does that mean?"

"Tarnation blazes!" thundered Cal Wiggin, furiously. "It means that the dogs of outlaws have attacked us an' that they likely mean to run us out of existence."

"Do you believe it is Rollins?"

"Certainly, I do!"

"Then let us go thither at once!"

With trumpet tones Wiggin was rallying his men.

Frank Reade, Jr., sprang aboard the wagon and at once opened the throttle.

The Steam Horse went out of the ranch-yard upon the full gallop.

Straight for the scene of action the young inventor headed.

Barney and Pomp, with their rifles, were at the loopholes ready for a shot at the foe.

As the Steam Horse drew nearer the town, if such the rude collection of cabins could be called, a fighting body of men were seen.

The Columbian Cityites had barricaded one of the streets and were making a desperate stand.

Several of the cabins had been fired by Rollins' men who seemed here, there and everywhere.

The outlaws, full three hundred in number, were galloping furiously about, shooting and yelling savagely.

That Sid Rollins meant to wipe out Columbian City that day was certain.

Frank Reade, Jr., saw this at a glance and shut his teeth tightly together.

His whole spirit was aroused and he was ready to sacrifice his life and his invention as well if need be.

Women and children were huddled beyond the barricade as well as men.

The attack had come so suddenly that few were prepared for it.

The outlaws swept several of the streets and set fire to a number of the cabins.

The settlers were making a brave fight, but it was plainly evident that they were no match for the outlaws.

They would certainly have met with defeat and possible massacre, had it not been for the Steam Horse.

As the wonderful invention thundered down into the streets of the town a wild cheer went up.

The settlers regained heart and now went in to fight like maniacs.

Frank had his tactics well outlined.

He sent the Horse careening through the town at full speed.

Death blazed from the loopholes in the wagon as Barney and Pomp worked the repeaters for all they were worth.

The outlaws seemed paralyzed by the appearance of the Horse.

The huge monster rushing so madly down upon them was certainly a terrifying spectacle, and they were pardonable for their terror.

One body of them sought to make a stand.

But the Steam Horse cut through them like an avalanche.

The Horse's hoofs beat them under foot and the wheels of the wagon crushed them.

The keen knives on the hubs of the wagon gashed their horses' legs and made terrible havoc.

At no point could the outlaws stand before the Steam Horse.

And Frank was too shrewd to make the fight at one spot.

He kept the Horse going at full speed up one street and down another.

The terrified outlaws were pursued by what was to them a frightful Nemesis.

In vain they rained volleys of rifle balls at the Horse.

The bullets had no effect whatever. The steel screen of the wagon turned them aside harmlessly.

The settlers, encouraged by the success of the Steam Horse and the demoralization of the outlaws, now assumed the offensive.

They rushed into the open and attacked Rollins' men.

The result was that the outlaws were unable to stand the onslaught.

Utterly routed they broke ranks and fled.

Had they not scattered widely the Steam Horse might have succeeded in exterminating the whole gang.

But the wretches were wise enough to separate, and in this manner most of them got beyond range.

The attempt of Sid Rollins to wipe out Columbian City had proved a fizzle.

Bitter defeat had been their portion, and fully a score of their dead and wounded were left upon the plain.

Cal Wiggin had arrived upon the spot with his men just in time to take part in the final charge.

The mayor of Columbian City was beside himself with exuberance and joy.

"Hooray!" he yelled. "I reckon old Sid Rollins will run up agin a hard snag when he tries to beat the Steam Hoss."

Then he ran up and fairly embraced Frank.

"Mister Reade, ye have the respect an' gratitude of all in Columbian City!" he cried, earnestly. "An' ye'll git yer pay."

"I don't ask any pay," replied Frank, modestly. "It is return enough for me to know that the ends of villainy have been thwarted."

"Hooray for Mister Frank Reade, Jr.!" cried one of the crowd, and the welkin rang with the cheers.

Everybody was in a happy state of mind now that the foe had been defeated.

The Steam Horse was regarded much as heathens look upon one of their gods, henceforth the young inventor was regarded as wholly infallible.

It had occurred to Frank to learn the whereabouts and character of the den of hiding of Rollins.

So he asked Wiggin about it.

The big ranchman shook his head solemnly, saying:

"That's purty much of a mystery, Mister Reade. Of course I hev my ideas on ther subject, but mebbe they ain't correct."

"Ah," said Frank, quietly. "What are they?"

"Well," replied Wiggin, slowly, "thar used ter be an old yarn about a ranchero who used ter be in these parts. He was a queer old covey, an' nobody cud tell whar he cum from nor whar he rounded up."

"But he allus appeared on ther range with ther handsomest lot of cattle an' sheep ye ever saw. Buyers would come from everywhere to get his stock."

"He an' two sons did all the ridin', herdin' an' roundin' up. They camped when cut on ther range, and when in the autumn they cum back with a few young cattle ter start in agin, they'd go out of sight an' we wouldn't see 'em agin till spring."

"It warn't no use watchin' on 'em. You never cud tell whar they went ter."

"They simply vanished an' that was all. Ther old man allus wore a white rabbit skin cap and with his white hair he looked like an old sorcerer or something of ther kind!"

"That is queer!" declared Frank. "But what has that got to do with Rollins and his hiding place?"

"Oh, didn't I tell ye? Wall, we all on us kinder reckoned that he had some kind of an underground ranch somewhere—"

"An underground ranch?"

"Yas; yer see his kentry is full of underground rivers and sich like, an' we hev kinder thought old Uncle Job Edson, that was his name, might hev found some rich place somewhars about, where he cud crawl underground an' hide till spring."

"It is possible!"

"So yer see that started ther tradition of an underground ranch. Nobody has ever seen it, that I know of, but thar's the mystery about it—an' there's many an old herder won't believe any different!"

"Where do you believe this ranch was located?"

"Hain't ther slightest idee!"

"Then you think that it now forms a hiding-place for Rollins?"

"Can't say fer sartin. But it's sure that old Edson disappeared with his two sons an' his cattle just about the time that Sid Rollins turned up hereabouts."

"Now I kin a'most swear that I seen some of ther old man's cattle in Rollins' herd. Some av us thought Rollins might hev bought ther old man out or—"

The ranchero changed his quid of tobacco from one cheek to the other and gave Frank a significant look.

"I think I understand!" said the young inventor. "Rollins may have found the underground ranch and made away with the rightful owners and—"

"Exactly! Now you've got the whole thing!"

Frank was deeply interested.

The idea of an underground ranch he well knew was a mere vagary as yet.

Still it fascinated him and he could not relinquish it.

"Then Edson has not been seen for over three years?"

"No!"

"And Rollins made his appearance here about that time?"

"Yes."

"It looks as if a little detective work might clear that up," said Frank, coolly.

"Wall, I did all I could," declared the big herder. "We took armed men an' rode the kentry all up an' down. But we cudn't find any evidence agin Rollins."

"Were you at all acquainted with Edson or his sons?"

Wiggin shifted his position.

"Wall," he said, carelessly, "I 'low we was. I never spoke to ther old man but twice in my life, but one of the boys used to know Sis pooty well. He was a handsome young feller an' edicated too. His name was Waldo, an' his brother's Bert. I 'low he an' Sis were pooty sweet one time an' I kinder thought we'd soon know more about the underground ranch, though he'd never tell us anything. But one day he disappeared."

"Sis has been picked and half sick over it since, an' will declar' thet he had foul play, but ter relieve her mind, I try an' convince her that it's a case of jilt. See?"

Frank nodded his head.

"I see!" he replied. "And pardon me, Mr. Wiggin, but I think your caughter has better penetration than you have."

"Eh?" exclaimed the ranchman; "then you think—"

"Think? Why I am confident that Rollins has done away with that man and his two sons, and I think you will find that I am right."

"Jericho! if I thought so I wouldn't rest until I had scalped the euss!"

"I am quite confident of it," declared Frank. "Indeed, so very sure, that—"

He did not finish the sentence.

A loud cry of alarm went up, and a tall youth on a mustang was seen riding furiously up from the direction of the Wiggin ranch.

"Thunder and guns!" gasped Wiggin, with pale face. "Sumthin's wrong. That's my boy Al, an' he's as white as a sheet."

The next moment the lad tumbled speechless from the pony's back by his father's side.

"Wall, speak, ye lubber!" thundered the old man. "What has happened?"

"Oh, dad!" cried the lad, with accents of terror and dread, "ma sent me down for you. Oh, Sis—she—she—"

Wiggin gripped the boy's shoulder.

"Wall, speak!" he thundered.

"Oh, dad, Sis—she—she's gone!"

CHAPTER V.

THE STRANGE LIGHT ON THE PRAIRIE.

Big Cal Wiggin reeled like a mighty tree beneath the lightning stroke.

His face was ashy in hue, but his voice was like muffled organ notes as he roared:

"Whar has she gone?"

"Oh, we don't know," whined the boy. "Ma said that four men grabbed her when she was at the spring for water and rode away with her on horseback."

Wiggin gave a convulsive gasp and turned to Frank.

"My God! that is Sid Rollins' work! he moaned. "He means to git square with me."

Then Wiggin went into the saddle with one leap.

Away went his horse at a breakneck pace to the ranch.

His men followed.

As for Frank Reade, Jr., he realized that if beautiful Sis Wiggin was indeed in the power of the villain, Sid Rollins, her lot would be hard indeed.

"Golly, Marse Frank," cried Pomp, "wha' am yo' gwine to do about it?"

"I am going to rescue her!" cried the young inventor.

He sprang into the wagon.

"Bejabbers, av I git a shot at the omadhoun I'll soon soon spile his game!" cried Barney.

Frank opened the throttle and away went the Steam Horse.

Down across the plain and into the ranch yard.

There a terrible state of excitement was found.

Mrs. Wiggin was in a frantic state.

"Oh, ye must save my Sis!" she wailed. "Oh, ye must save her! If ye are men go an' save my Sis!"

"Ay, wife," cried pallid Cal Wiggin, "we will not come back without her, be sure of that."

"Mr. Wiggin," cried Frank, "we are at your disposal. We will help you in your quest."

"God bless ye, sir!" cried the agonized ranchero. "Ye'll git yer pay!"

Out upon the plain in pursuit dashed the cowboys from Wiggin's ranch.

For miles they scoured the plain.

The Steam Horse accompanied them.

But the quest was futile.

Not a trace could be found of the abductors. Frank called Wiggin to the wagon and asked:

"Don't you think they may have gone to those distant hills?"

"No," replied the ranchero shaking his head, "thar's only one place ter look fer an' I believe it's ther underground ranch!"

"Then you believe they've taken her there?"

"I do."

"Then how would you go to work to trace her thither?"

Wiggin was nonplused.

"Upon my word, I hardly know!" he replied. "Of course I kin look fer th er trail. But mebbe that will fail us!"

"It won't do any harm to try!"

"Ye're right enough."

It was decided therefore to go back and look for the trail.

Some of the keenest plainsmen were put upon it.

But it could be followed but a few miles.

In the shifting sands it was soon lost. There seemed no clew within tangible grasp.

A pall of gloom settled down upon the throng.

Night was coming on rapidly, and thus far nothing had been gained. It was a most dismal outlook.

Cal Wiggin was nigh dead from mental worryment and distress.

It was certainly a terrible ordeal for him, the frantic father. To know that his dear child was in the power of the wretch Rollins seemed more than he could bear.

In vain Frank tried to comfort him.

He would listen to nothing of the sort, and would moan:

"Fate is agin me, I tell ye. But if that skunk does harm to my gal I'll foller him to ther end of time but I'll have revenge on him!"

"You will have the sympathy and aid of us all!" declared Frank Reade, Jr.

"Thar's only one way as I kin see ter do now!" declared Wiggin, desperately.

"What is that?" asked Frank.

"It seems ter me thet we must all scatter an' work it on a long scout. An' yit it won't do fer us ter leave ther ranch too long at a time or ther skunks will descend on it an' knock us out of time."

This seemed only too true.

It was a desperate predicament.

But Frank Reade, Jr., now offered a solution of the difficulty.

"Pick a dozen good men, Wiggin!" he said. "Leave the rest to defend the ranch. Then we will go ahead and try to locate the den of Sid Rollins!"

Wiggin's face brightened.

"I reckon ye've hit it right, Mister Reade!" he cried. "It's sartin ter be ther best move. Wall, we'll do it!"

Wiggin at once picked a dozen of his men.

The others set out upon the return to the ranch.

But the twelve, headed by Wiggin, and with the Steam Horse, set out to the westward.

Night came on rapidly.

Frank did not like to travel after dark with the Horse, for fear of getting into some hole or quicksand.

But he decided to travel this night and look assiduously for the den of the outlaw gang.

Wiggin insisted flatly that it was not in the far distant hills.

"I tell ye, ye'll find it somewhar in ther perairy!" he declared. "It ain't in no hills at all."

"All right," replied Frank. "Above ground or underground, we've got to and will find it."

"We will or die!" declared the ranchero.

Then all separated.

It was agreed to meet the next morning at a lone pine at the base of the hills and report.

Soon the horsemen had all gone from sight out over the prairie.

Frank and Barney and Pomp, with the Steam Horse, took a course to the north-west.

With the headlight of the Horse lit, it would not have been so difficult for them to see their way.

But Frank would not agree to this. He knew well enough the deadly risk that would be incurred.

The enemy would be sure to see them and could easily keep out of the way.

To be sure they could as easily locate the Horse by means of its clanking tread, but they might not be able to tell what it was in the darkness.

The furnace of the Steam Horse was made to close up tight so that no light came from it, and the wagon could be darkened.

But the hissing of the steam and the clank of iron could not be concealed.

However, Frank did not fear this greatly, and for hours the Horse roamed the prairie in the gloom.

Objects could be plainly seen outlined against the sky.

Once a herd of buffalo was started up and driven away into the night.

A prowling Comanche fled for his life at sight and hearing of the Horse.

Prowling coyotes ventured within a certain radius of the Horse, but did not dare to come too near.

The inmates of the wagon kept a very careful watch of the prairie.

Frank had become interested and fascinated with the story of the underground ranch.

He attached a quite firm belief to its existence.

"It is by no means impossible," was his desideratum. "As Wiggin says, the rivers hereabouts run underground, and it is very likely that there may be a secret cavern in the prairie hereabouts."

So with this strong belief Frank went at once about the quest.

"Golly, Marse Frank, if dat cavern am right out in de middle ob de perairy," cried Pomp, "why don' somebody fin' it afo' dis?"

"Oh, well, that is easily answered," replied Frank. "The entrance to it may be cleverly concealed."

"Don' see how yo' am gwine to do dat, Marse Frank?"

"Oh, there are a great many ways," replied the young inventor.

"Begorra, it's not at all strange that ye shouldn't know anythin' about it, naygur!" cried Barney, derisively.

"What am dat yo' say, Iish? I jes' don' wan' yo' to insult dis chile."

"Bejabbers, I cudn't do that," retorted the Irishman.

"Yo' am jes' a no 'count Iishman."

"Yez are a big stuff, naygur!"

"Don' yo' say dat ag'in, chile!"

"Hold on!" cried Frank, sternly. "No skylarking just now."

This settled the question.

Had not Frank been present there was no doubt but that the two comical rascals would have had a setto.

But Frank would not tolerate this.

There was too much serious work on hand just at present.

"Keep an eye out to the rear, Pomp!" cried Frank. "If you see anything at all suspicious let me know."

"A'right, sah!"

Frank meanwhile was driving the Horse slowly along, when suddenly he received a startling surprise.

Something flashed across his vision for a brief moment.

He rubbed his eyes to make sure it was not an optical illusion.

But he was not deceived.

It was a singular prism of light which flashed against the horizon line and up into the sky.

Only for the briefest instant was it visible.

To a person less well informed it would have borne the appearance of some unaccountable display of nature's forces from the heavens.

But to Frank Reade, Jr., it was clear enough.

The young inventor knew that it came from the level of the prairie, and at a distance not very far from the very spot where he stood now.

Frank closed the throttle tightly, and allowed the Steam Horse to glide behind a hummock in the rolling surface of the plain, which hid it completely from view in that direction.

Then he whispered to Barney:

"Come with me. Pomp, you are to remain in the wagon."

"A'right, sah."

Barney was overjoyed at the discrimination shewn him, and at once climbed out of the wagon.

Then with Frank he climbed to the top of the hummock.

Here flat upon the ground they waited the enactment of thrilling incidents.

CHAPTER VI.

INTO A DEATH TRAP.

FRANK felt sure that the light would appear again.

He was not wrong.

Barely had they settled themselves down upon the hummock when the same gleam of shadowy light shot up into the sky.

This time it remained for a full second, and Barney saw it.

"Shure, phwativer was that, Misther Frank?" asked the Celt.

"Ah, then you saw it?" asked Frank, eagerly.

"Shure, sor, that I did!"

"Let us wait awhile and see if it comes again."

Time passed slowly.

Full twenty minutes elapsed and then Barney clutched Frank's arm.

"Do yez hear that?"

"What?"

But Frank heard it now.

It was the distant clatter of horses' hoofs.

Then into view in the distance, outlined against the midnight sky, was visible the forms of a horse and rider.

Nearer they drew every moment.

Frank and Barney watched them intently until they were quite near.

Then the horse was suddenly reined up and a peculiar call like that of a night jay was heard.

Lake a statue on his horse sat the rider.

Then suddenly there was the same peculiar flash of light athwart the sky and horizon, and—

A gasping cry escaped Frank Reade, Jr.'s lips.

He rubbed his eyes and Barney did the same.

What did it mean?

The horse and rider in that instant had disappeared as completely as if dissolved into thin air.

Barney and Frank sat facing each other for a full minute in silence. Then the Celt began to tremble.

"Shure, Misther Frank," whimpered Barney, "I do belave that was the banshee's call, an' shure I think we had better leave this spot at onct."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Frank, impatiently. "I gave you credit for better sense, Barney. You know better than that."

"Shure, thin, Misther Frank, phwativer the worruld was it, sor?"

"We will soon find out."

"Phwat will ye do, sor?"

"Keep quiet!"

Frank had been about to glide from the hummock out on to the prairie to quietly investigate matters.

But he checked himself.

There was a reason for this.

A startled cry came from Barney.

"Hush, you simpleton!" whispered Frank. "You will betray us."

There was another strange gleam of light, and then, outlined against the sky, Frank saw a dark, shadowy form.

It was a horse, and upon the animal's back was a man.

Frank was mystified.

Where had the rider vanished to so suddenly, and what had brought him so quickly back again?

It was certainly a queer thing.

But even as Frank pondered over the matter, there was another strange flash of light and—

Presto!

Another horse and rider stood beside the first.

Ten times this was repeated and then a curious call like that of the night jay was heard, the horses wheeled and in a body the ten men galloped away.

Silence reigned after their departure, broken only by the distant howl of a coyote.

Frank Reade, Jr., was completely mystified by the curious sights he had witnessed.

He certainly was not dreaming and was not out of his senses.

What he had witnessed was beyond all doubt a genuine occurrence.

But Barney did not look upon it in this light.

The Celt was shivering and groaning in abject terror.

"Shure, Misther Frank," he whispered, "wud yez only heed the prayer av a poor Irish lad an' cum away an' not meddle wid sich a thing as that."

"Be still, you simpleton!" exclaimed Frank, out of patience; "there is just one thing about it. I will send you back to the wagon and fetch Pomp back if you don't brace up at once."

This had a magical effect upon Barney.

He did brace up wonderfully.

"Shure I'll obey yez, Misther Frank," he replied, "but whativer will yez do now?"

"You may remain here a moment. Wait until I come back."

"All right, sor!"

Barney was much averse to this, but he dared not refuse.

Frank left the hummock and proceeded out upon the prairie.

He advanced with great caution and silently.

He kept on until he had reached the spot where he had believed that the mysterious riders had been.

All was seemingly level prairie about him.

There was no sign of a yawning cavern or any other indication of the existence of an underground ranch.

The young inventor looked in vain for this.

He was much mystified.

"Certainly there is to be found an explanation of the mystery right here!" he declared to himself. "If not here, then I would like to know how else!"

He tapped the ground with his foot and experienced a thrill.

It might have been his fancy, but he could almost have sworn that it gave back a hollow sound.

"That is peculiar," he muttered. "Let me see if—"

But he did not finish the sentence.

There was the shuffling of feet, and Frank looked up, to see a dark horse and rider directly in front of him.

For a moment the young inventor could not move, so astounded was he.

Where the two had come from was to him a literal mystery.

He stood powerless to move hands or feet. The silent and somber horseman seemed to be regarding him, and made a sudden motion with his arm.

Frank did not make any move in response.

He, however, with a thrill, saw that the move was meant for a signal or countersign, and hardly knew what to do.

He had thought of making reply, when a harsh voice said:

"Stand and surrender!"

Then Frank saw the flash of a pistol barrel.

The young inventor knew full well that at that moment his life was in deadly peril.

But he did not lose courage.

"I am a friend!" he said, guardedly.

"Give the countersign, friend!"

"I have lost it!"

"Then you are an accursed spy and shall die. Make no move——"

But Frank Reade, Jr., had made a swift leap forward and caught the horse's bridle.

The pistol exploded, but the shot was wasted.

The next moment, and before the black horseman could reload, Frank had thrown the horse upon its haunches.

It had been the young inventor's purpose to unseat the rider, and thus bring him *hors du combat*.

But the result was most unlooked for.

With the explosion of the pistol there was a curious rumbling, the ground seemed tumbling about him, and Frank suddenly found himself in the midst of a glare of light so blinding as to completely dazzle him.

But he recovered from this effect quickly to behold a thrilling scene.

He was in what seemed like a rock walled chamber, but which he saw was in reality a deep cavern extending far into the bowels of the earth.

The horse and rider were before him, as were also half a dozen other men armed to the teeth.

How he came to drop so suddenly and unexpectedly into the place at the moment did not disturb Frank so much as the imminent danger which threatened him.

Half a dozen pistols covered him, and a savage voice cried:

"Move hand or foot and ye're a dead man!"

It is needless to say that Frank did not disregard this order.

He was a brave man, but by no means so reckless as to needlessly sacrifice his life.

He was aware that it was almost equivalent to death to fall into the hands of Sid Rollins.

But he believed that there was yet a chance for him.

Certainly he could not hope to cope successfully against these odds, so he threw up his arms and cried:

"All right, friends; I cave!"

In spite of his deadly peril the young inventor never once lost his self-possession.

He knew that the outlaws would not be apt to at once identify him as the man who, with the Steam Horse, carried such havoc into their ranks.

In this case he might hope, by playing a shrewd part, to get some sort of a show of leniency.

All this flashed through Frank's mind in a second.

He acted accordingly.

Simulating fear and cringing, he rejoined:

"I say, friends, ye ain't goin' to hold a poor devil like me here? I've never done ye any harm."

"Who the devil are ye?" asked one of the gang.

"I'm Jerry Neal, an' I'm only a poor chap that plays in a band fer a livin'."

Frank knew that his yachting cap would be sure to attract the attention and suspicion of the gang unless its use was explained to them.

It would be natural for them to fancy him the member of a band, and this bit of headgear would answer in making up the uniform.

"So ye play in the band, eh?" cried one of the outlaws. "Wall, mebber that's right, but what're ye doin' alone on the perrairy at this hour of the night?"

"I hocked my horse down here ter Columbian City, an' I'm tryin' ter git through ter Paradise Camp an' git a claim."

The outlaws eyed Frank sharply while he was speaking.

But the young inventor talked in such plausible fashion that they were completely deceived.

One of them gave an ironical laugh and said:

"You're kinder down on yer luck, I take it?"

"Just a bit," replied Frank, with a long drawn face.

"Wall, p'raps ye don't know what kind of a place ye've got inter? We're a hard crowd down here."

CHAPTER VII.

DISARMING SUSPICION.

"I'll not dispute your word," said Frank, ingenuously, "but how in the mischief did I get down here anyway?"

This brought a laugh from them all.

Several exchanged glances, and one man said:

"Wall, so long as ye'll never go out of here alive, I may as well tell ye how it is."

"I'll be very glad to know."

"D'ye see that roof up thar? Wall, it is made of plank and it swings on a big pivot. Ther top of it—outdoors as it were—is covered to the depth of two feet with sand and turf, and when in place ye couldn't tell it from the rest of the prairie. But when we work this windlass, down slides ther trap off this way and leaves yer hoss an' all on ther floor of ther cave. Kin I tell ye any more?"

The outlaws laughed uproariously as if they considered this a rare joke.

Frank simulated his part well.

He opened his mouth wide and then stared at the trap above with idle interest.

Then he yawned and abruptly queried:

"Who's got a chew of terbacker?"

One of the outlaws handed out a plug and Frank pretended to take a chew.

"Much obliged!"

"Wouldn't ye like suthin' else?" asked one of the outlaws, with a laugh. "Jest name yer desires an' they'll be granted."

Again the gang laughed.

Frank was keen enough to know that as long as he could keep them in this mood he would be all safe.

"So you're a bandmaster, are ye?" cried one of the men. "Whar's yer trombone?"

Frank looked scorn.

"I play the cornet!" he declared, pompously. "No trombone fer me!"

"D'ye play anything else?"

"The violin or any stringed instrument."

"That settles it. Fetch out that banjo, Jerry, an' set him to work."

Frank had really been bluffing, for he did not imagine there was a musical instrument in the place.

However, he was not going to be stuck, for that would be fatal.

Fortunately he knew a few airs upon the banjo.

One of the outlaws now appeared with the instrument.

"Tingle her up, pard!" cried one of the gang. "Let's see if ye're a man of yer word."

"Cert," replied Frank, cheerily. "I allus does jist what I agrees."

"What'll ye have?"

"Anything ther's lively."

Frank tuned the banjo and then proceeded to work the strings.

He did the job in lively fashion.

Reels and jigs and clogs galore were rattled out of that banjo.

The outlaws were delighted.

It has been aptly said that music hath charms and so forth.

There was never a more apt illustration of the truth of this maxim.

The music put aside from the hearts of the outlaws most evil thoughts, and Frank's chances were better.

After a while the young inventor began to sing.

Frank had a wonderful tenor voice, and with the banjo accompaniment he literally charmed his hearers.

When he had finished the applause was deafening, and one of the gang cried:

"Ye're a dandy. We're glad ye dropped in on us."

"Well, now I've made ye a good call and entertained ye well, I reckon you'll allow me to go on my journey," said Frank, appealingly.

But that changed matters.

"Kain't do it, friend," said one of the gang.

Frank looked his impatience.

"What's the matter with ye?" he queried, sharply. "Why won't yer let me go?"

"It's 'ginst orders."

"Orders be blowed! Now look here, friends, I've got to get through ter Paradise——"

The gang laughed uproariously.

"Ye'll git through to Paradise fast enough," said one.

Frank feigned astonishment.

"I say, what kind of a gang are ye?" he asked, testily.

"Kain't ye see?"

"Mebbe ye're cut-throats?"

"That's ther ticket. Ain't ye a bit skeered?"

"Not a bit," retorted Frank. "But look here, pards, thar's no sense in treatin' me this way. Let me out of here."

"Not much. Ye're too vallyable. Shall I put him ter bed, Jim?"

"Yas."

"All right; come on, my love."

With coarse laughter all the outlaws arose to their feet. Two of them seized Frank by the arm and began to lead him deeper into the cavern.

The place was well lit with oil lamps.

Soon they had paused before an iron barred door set in a wall of rock.

"Hold on, friends," pleaded Frank. "Don't use me that way. Why can't ye be fair with me?"

"Ain't we?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Ye're goin' to lock me up."

"Well, that's all right."

"No, it ain't."

"Look here, pilgrim," said one of the gang, mysteriously plucking Frank's coat sleeve, "keep low an' say nuthin'. We're goin' ter help ye, but can't do it to-night—see?"

Frank could say no more.

He knew that he was in for a bad scrape, and there was no way but to accept it philosophically.

So he entered the cell and the door clanged behind him.

He was a prisoner in the stronghold of Sid Rollins.

It was a startling thought.

Really there seemed but a scant chance for his life. When he reflected that Rollins would be sure to recognize him the next day Frank's heart fell.

"Confound those ignoramuses!" he muttered. "I'm sorry I entertained them now. They ought to let me out."

But they had not, and there seemed no other way but to make the best of it.

This Frank proceeded to do.

He was in a square chamber of the cavern, which looked as if it had been hewn out by artificial means.

There was a shakedown bed in the place and upon it Frank cast himself.

He was thinking of Barney and Pomp, and wondering what would become of them, when he became conscious of a thrilling fact.

This was a genteel tapping upon the stone wall of his cell.

In a moment Frank sat upright.

What did it mean?

He asked himself this question. In a moment an answer came.

A low, sibilant whisper came to him.

"Hullo, fellow prisoner!"

In an instant Frank knew that the voice came from an adjoining cell.

"Hullo!" he replied.

"Who are you?"

"I am Frank Reade, Jr."

"Where did they catch you?"

"Right over their infernal trap!"

"Ah, why did they not kill you?"

"I don't know. They might have done it and spared me this confinement."

"So I have thought often. But wait until you've been shut up three years as I have."

Frank gave a little cry.

"Three years?"

"That's it."

"Who—who are you?"

"I am Waldo Edson!"

In an instant Frank was upon his feet.

"Great heavens!" he gasped; "then you are not dead?"

"Do I talk like it?"

"No, but everybody thinks that you and your father and brother all fell victims to Sid Rollins' murderous propensities."

"Ah, it is an awful story. But how did you hear of it?"

Frank then detailed the project which had brought him into the West.

The young ranchman listened with deep interest.

He seemed in awful distress when informed of the fact that Sis Wiggin had fallen into the hands of Rollins.

"Oh, that will be a fate worse than death!" he groaned. "Oh, I must escape from here and rescue her!"

"But this was once your father's retreat, was it not?" asked Frank.

"Indeed, yes. For many years we have herded cattle by summer and wintered hundreds of them in this underground ranch. I can tell you that there are vast chambers, covering acres, near here, and the cattle used to remain in them all winter, escaping the bleak winds, and kept on fodder which we stored in summer, they came out in the spring the handsomest cattle on the range."

"Wonderful!" cried Frank; "then the underground ranch is no myth?"

"You can see that it is not."

"But—how did Rollins happen to find you out?"

"He played the sneak and leaved our secret entrance. There are four of them. Then he descended upon the cave and made us prisoners."

"Terrible luck!"

"Well, yes, I should say so. We have been kept here for three years. Indeed, I feel like the old man of the Bastille."

"But your father and brother—where are they?"

"In some other cell. At first we were together, but to make it harder for us Rollins had us separated. He is a fiend in human shape."

"You are right there. But why did he imprison you instead of killing you?"

"Ah, that is his fiendish method. He wants to torture us to death by this close confinement."

"He is a fiend, indeed!"

"He is all of that. But, my God, it nearly kills me to know that Sis is in his power!"

"It is the truth, nevertheless."

"Then I must escape, and this very night!"

Frank gave a great start.

"This very night?" he gasped. "What do you mean?"

"Wait a moment."

There was a grating sound like the displacing of a stone, and then Frank saw the slender body of a youth coming through an aperture in the wall close by the floor.

Waldo Edson stood before him.

Frank was amazed.

"Did you make that hole through there?" he asked.

"I did!"

"It must have cost you some work?"

"Yes, I was a month doing it. But it paid me, for it enabled me to find the way to liberty."

"The way to liberty?"

"Yes, and I should have used that opportunity days ago but I have

tarried hoping to get a chance to liberate my father and brother. Come with me and I will soon place you safely beyond imprisonment here."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ESCAPE.

FRANK READE, JR., was dumfounded by this thrilling declaration. He could hardly believe his senses.

"Do you mean that?" he cried.

"Every word of it."

"But—where is the outlet; how do you expect to get out of here?"

"Come here a moment."

Waldo Edson seized Frank's arm and drew him to the other extremity of the cave.

The wall here was natural, and seemed like the solid rock substance of the sub-strata.

But Waldo applied his muscle to a square bit of the wall, and to Frank's surprise it yielded.

An aperture was revealed beyond, some feet in circumference.

"I tapped the wall here," said young Edson, in explanation, "and I soon found that it gave back a hollow sound. I conceived the idea of a cavern beyond. At once I went to work with a dull knife which I found in one corner of my cell. By hard work I succeeded in making an aperture large enough for me to pass through. I went through one night and explored the cavern beyond. I found an outlet and could have made my escape then."

"And why not?" asked Frank.

"I have told you. I have lived in the forlorn hope of finding some way of effecting the rescue of my father and brother also. That is why I came back."

"Then you have abandoned that idea?"

"No; but I see that I cannot do it by remaining here. Perhaps by getting outside and enlisting aid I may succeed."

"I don't see why you cannot!" cried Frank. "There are several hundred of the Columbian City men who will help."

"Yes; I believe it is my best move. At any rate we will try it!"

"Once in the open air and with freedom, I think I can give you such aid as will settle this affair!" said Frank. "But it is fortunate that I was put in this cell!"

"It is fortunate that you were not instantly made away with!"

"Ah, is that their method?"

"You may be sure that it is. Few come in here to escape alive!"

"Then they are murderous fiends!"

"That is what they are. But—hark! What is that?"

A distant sound of approaching footsteps came to their hearing.

It is needless to say that both were much alarmed.

"Some one is coming," whispered Waldo. "Quick! for your life! If we are found here, then all is lost."

"Go ahead," returned Frank. "I will follow."

Even at that moment a hand was laid upon the latch.

But Waldo Edson had slipped through the aperture.

Frank was half through when the door swung open.

It was so dark in the cell, however, that the light from the visitor's lantern did not quite reach this corner.

Therefore Frank succeeded in passing clear through into the next cavern before the visitor became aware of anything wrong.

Then a harsh voice cried:

"I say, you blockheads! You told me there was a man in this chamber."

"So thar is!" came back the reply.

"No thar ain't!"

It was Sid Rollins' voice.

Frank recognized it at once.

The ruffian now began to make the air black with savage oaths.

"I tell ye there ain't nobody here. Thunder an' blazes! Is this ther way you fellers tend ter bizness when I'm gone? Ther cuss has escaped!"

Frank and Waldo paused to hear no more.

"Come!" whispered Edson, "there's no time to lose. They will be right along after us!"

Frank followed the young ranchman without hesitation.

Had the young inventor been alone he would hardly have known which direction to take to get out of the place.

But Edson was thoroughly familiar with the lay of the land.

The foe could be heard coming after them full bent.

On the two escaped prisoners rushed at full speed.

Through the devious passages of the cavern Edson led the way.

Suddenly the passage took an upward trend, and then Frank felt the cool night air upon his face.

The next moment they were out upon the prairie.

So small was the aperture which formed the outlet of the cavern that they were barely able to squeeze through it.

A clump of sage bushes overhung the exit, so that it would have been hard to have found it from the outside.

But the escape had been consummated.

Frank Reade, Jr., felt like one given a new lease of life.

He looked about him as well as the gloom would permit.

Then he gave a startled cry.

"What is it?" asked Edson, sharply.

"Look!"

Not fifty yards distant, outlined against the sky, which was now rapidly assuming the gray light of dawn, Frank saw the Steam Horse.

No sight ever gave the young inventor more joy than that.

"What is it?" asked Edson.

"The Steam Horse!"

"The what?"

"Ah, I forgot!" cried Frank. "I have not told you about my Steam Horse, a wonderful invention of mine."

"Indeed you have not!" declared the young ranchman.

With this Frank began to describe the Horse, and also explained his mission in the country.

"But come and see for yourself!" cried Frank. "You can tell very much better."

The next moment as Frank neared the hummock where he had left Barney a dark form arose in his path.

"Howld on there!" cried Barney, for he it was. "Who goes there?"

"Friends!" replied Frank, in a disguised voice.

"Thin if yez are such yez may advance an' give the countersign, or be heavens I'll blow a hole troo yez!"

"Easy, Barney!" said Frank. "Put up your gun!"

A cry of joy escaped the Irishman's lips.

"Whurroo! Bejabers av it ain't Misther Frank!" he cried.

"That is who it is," said Frank.

"But shure, sor, where have yez been all av the toime?"

"I have had smme thrilling experiences, Barney," replied Frank.

"But first let me introduce to you Mr. Waldo Edson."

Barney and Waldo shook hands.

"Shure, sor, I'm glad to see yez. But tell me all about it, Misther Frank."

"Well, I have been in the underground ranch."

Barney gave a gulping cry.

"Shure, yez don't mane it?"

"Yes, I do."

"An' yez cum out aloive?"

"Owing to my good fortune in making the acquaintance of Mr. Edson here."

Pomp now appeared on the scene, and after he had been presented to Waldo the story of Frank's adventures were related.

Pomp and Barney listened with deep interest.

"Shure, sor," exclaimed Barney, "it's a lucky man yez are, an' it's mighty glad we are to have yez back!"

"Then you saw nothing of the foe?" asked Frank.

"Not a bit, sor."

"Well, I don't believe that we will have long to wait before we shall see them," cried Frank.

The words had barely left his lips when Barney gave a startled cry.

"Och hone, there they cum," he yelled.

All saw that the Celt was right.

Out on the prairie lights were seen moving about and dark forms.

Frank sprang to the door of the wagon.

"All aboard!" he cried. "We've lively work before us!"

All crowded aboard the wagon.

Young Edson could not but regard the Steam Horse with wonderment, but there was no time for expression just at the moment.

The foe were close at hand and Frank opening the throttle let the Steam Horse run out on the prairie.

Wild yells went up from the outlaws when they saw the Horse.

A volley of rifle balls came rattling against the sides of the wagon.

Waldo gave a start as if to dodge the bullets.

This made Barney and Pomp laugh.

"Bress yo' haht!" cried Pomp. "Don' yo' be one lilly bit 'fraid! Dem bullets kain't go troo' dis waggin!"

"Thank fortune for that!" cried Waldo, with a laugh at his own timorousness.

Of course the outlaws could not overtake the Steam Horse.

Frank took a circuitous course, and Barney and Pomp began firing into the midst of the foe.

So destructive was this fire that the outlaws retreated into the underground ranch.

In a few moments not one of them was to be seen above ground.

"I have an idea," cried Frank. "I believe we could lay siege to the rascals and starve them out."

"But what would become of the prisoners?" asked Waldo.

That question was settled.

Daylight was at hand now and Frank took a glass and began to scan the horizon for some signs of Cal Wiggin and his companions.

To his joy he saw a body of horsemen to the southwest.

They were every moment drawing nearer, and Frank felt sure that they were Wiggin's men.

So sure of this was he that he started the Steam Horse to meet them.

As they drew nearer big Cal himself could be seen in the van riding like a major general.

He doffed his sombrero and waved it at sight of the Horse.

Frank pulled the whistle valve by way of reply.

The next moment Cal rode alongside and dropped from the saddle.

His face was ghastly in pallor and showed the mental worry to which he had been subjected.

"Hello, Mister Reade!" he cried. "Wall, I hain't had no luck at all. I hope ye've had better."

"Well, I think I have!" replied Frank. "I have found the underground ranch."

Cal Wiggin gave a violent start.

"Ye don't mean it!" he gasped. "Then it's a fact?"

"Every word of it. I was for several hours in the hands of the outlaws, but I managed to escape with the aid of this gentleman here."

Waldo Edson leaped out of the wagon and approached Wiggin.

With a wild cry Cal Wiggin sprang forward. His face betrayed surprise and great joy.

CHAPTER IX.

THE COURIER FROM THE RANCH.

"I ain't dreaming!" he cried. "It's really, truly, Waldo Edson!"

"That is who it is, Mr. Wiggin!" cried the young ranchman. "And I am powerful glad to see you."

"Glad ter see me?" roared the big ranchman, "why, lad, it's with a hull lifetime ter see you. But Sis—God defend us, lad—ye know about it?"

"I do," replied Waldo, resolutely. "And we are going to rescue her."

"Ha, I like to hear ye talk that way, lad. But yer father an' brother—"

"They are prisoners in the underground ranch."

"Then it's true that ye were one up by Rollins and his gang?"

"Yes."

With this Waldo detailed to the big ranchman a full account of his adventures and the state of affairs in the wonderful underground ranch.

"Wall, lad," cried Wiggin, emphatically, "what would ye advise us ter do?"

The same query was written upon the faces of the others.

Waldo was thoughtful for a moment.

"I can see but one thing to do," he said.

"And what's that?"

"We must band together, invade the ranch and give battle to the gang and drive them out."

There was a moment of silence.

Then Frank asked:

"Will that not be risky? Will it not be drawing the battle down to close combat?"

"Not at all," replied young Edson. "You see, there are miles of cavern underneath us here. Why, I tell you, there are chambers which cover acres, where we used to stall our cattle. It would be an enormous field to fight over."

"Who'd ever think it?" exclaimed Wiggin, in amazement. "But can't they slip away from us easy enough down thar?"

"Not if I am with you to direct the movements," replied Waldo, with flashing eyes. "Why, with this Steam Horse you could corner and do up the whole gang of them in no time."

"What?" exclaimed Frank, with interest. "Will it be possible to take the Horse into the underground ranch?"

"Why, certainly."

"By what entrance?"

"I know an entrance two miles from here in the edge of the hills. It is a wide-mouthed cavern, and an army of men could march into it."

"Wonderful!" cried Frank, with inspiration. "Come, friends, let us waste no time but start in at once to give the outlaws a good thrashing!"

"We're with ye!" cried Cal, springing to saddle. "Down with Sid Rollins and his cut-throat crew."

The plainsmen all cheered wildly.

It was certain that a start would have been made at once for the cavern entrance.

But at that moment a cry came from one of the men.

"What's the matter?" cried Wiggin.

"Look yender!" was the reply.

All beheld a thrilling sight.

Over a distant roll in the prairie there came a white, foam-flecked horse.

Upon the horse's back was a slender lad who was riding with all his energy.

It was Oscar Wiggin.

The lad had been left at Columbian City, with some score of armed men, to guard the ranch there in the absence of nearly all the able bodied men in town.

The appearance of the lad in this fashion did not augur well, and Cal Wiggin gave a cry:

"By beavers, I'll bet thar's suthin' wrong at home!" he cried.

Every moment Oscar drew nearer.

Finally the pony, staggering, was drawn up by the Steam Horse and Oscar completely exhausted fell out of the saddle.

For a moment the boy could not speak.

"What's the matter?" thundered Wiggin. "Why don't ye speak up like a man?"

"Oh, dad!" cried the breathless boy, "ma sent me fer you to cum home jest as quick as you can. Thar's a hundred of ther outlaws trying to burn up the city. Our men are fightin' like mad an' gittin' ther wust of it. If ye don't go now they'll be all dead an' ther ranch burned!"

Words cannot depict the sensation created by this intelligence.

Big Cal Wiggin was like a madman.

"Up lads!" he cried, in a voice of thunder. "Every man to saddle. We've got ter save Columbian City afore we do anything else."

"How unfortunate!" cried Waldo. "It is our best opportunity to attack the foe in their den."

"Yes, but we kain't do it," cried Wiggin. "What'll ye do, Mr. Reade?"

"The first thing, as you say, is to save Columbian City!" cried Frank. "Go ahead and I will follow you."

"All right."

Away over the plain thundered the cavalcade of settlers.

Frank turned to Edson.

"You had better go with us," he said. "It is the only thing we can do. We can return later."

"If any of us live to do that."

"I think we will. I imagine we can put a different face on matters when we get to the ranch."

Frank leaped into the wagon, and the others followed him.

Opening the throttle, Frank now let the Horse out.

He proposed to show the others how fast the Steam Horse could really go.

It is needless to say they were astonished.

The cavalcade had got fully a mile the start.

But Frank let the Horse right out, and the way they raced across that plain was a caution to railroad trains.

The fleet mustangs of the settlers were overtaken and passed as easily as though they had been hitched to a post.

Away in advance went the Steam Horse.

"Mercy on us!" cried Waldo Edson. "We are flying. How dare you go so fast, Mr. Reade? If anything should break—"

"But it won't," replied Frank, with an ironical smile.

"Well, I am satisfied!" cried Edson. "I would rather ride a bucking broncho for safety."

"You are much safer," replied Frank. "No harm can come to you!"

The settlers were left far behind.

Indeed they sank out of sight before Columbian City came to view.

A thrilling scene was now accorded our party of adventurers.

Great clouds of smoke arose from the town and it could be seen that nearly half of the buildings had been burned.

The fight seemed to be confined now to the neighborhood of the Wiggin ranch.

There the score of defenders left behind were making a bold and most successful stand.

But yet the tide of battle might turn against them at any moment.

As the Steam Horse galloped down the slope into the town Frank pulled the whistle valve.

This had an electrical effect upon those in the ranch.

Their cheers could be heard on board the Steam Horse.

Barney and Pomp were ready with their deadly repeating rifles.

The outlaws were deployed in a line completely surrounding the stockade of the ranch.

Frank let the Horse gallop quite near and then Barney and Pomp poured in a volley.

It was returned by the outlaws.

But their position now was by no means a reassuring one.

With an enemy in the rear as well as in front, this was a state of affairs which had driven old veterans to rout on many a battle field.

The bravest soldier can face an attack in front, but the moment that one also comes from the rear he is unnerved.

Frank knew this well enough and felt sure of routing the foe.

He let the Steam Horse gallop around the lines of the outlaws while Barney and Pomp got in their most destructive work in fine shape.

The outlaws made a desperate fight.

But the situation was a terrifying one and they could not stand it for long.

Dismay and terror seized them as their ranks began to be decimated so rapidly.

Then they broke into confusion and rushed for their horses.

The defenders of the ranch cheered.

The victory was won.

In a very few moments the whole gang of outlaws were in flight.

They could not stand the terrific fire from the Steam Horse.

Frank was resolved to make the defeat an effectual one.

Therefore he sent the Horse crashing among them.

Men were trampled, horses thrown and with wildest terror the outlaws, such as could, took to flight.

Fully a score of them surrendered and were led prisoners into the ranch.

It was a sweeping victory, and as the last gun was fired, Frank turned to the amazed Edson and said:

"Now let us go back to the underground ranch and demolish that gang!"

Just at that moment Wiggin and his men came dashing into town.

The big ranchman was delighted at the result and overjoyed to find that his family was safe.

"We owe it all to the Steam Horse and his master!" he cried, exuberantly. "Give 'em three cheers, boys."

These were given with a will.

Then Frank cried:

"Well, shall we go back to the underground ranch?"

All cheered again.

No time was lost.

Fresh horses were quickly procured and the start was made.

Once more they were striding away over the plain.

The sun was past the hour of noon when the hills were reached.

Waldo Edson now took command.

He quickly located the wide cavern entrance. It was a mammoth entrance surely and the Steam Horse had no trouble in entering.

Two miles of travel underground was now necessary.

But the cavern now diverged into mammoth chambers with floors as smooth as a billiard table.

The headlight of the Steam Horse lit up well ahead so that they were enabled to see their way quite clearly.

The cavalcade behind, under Cal Wiggin's leadership, kept well up behind the Steam Horse.

Waldo Edson, who was familiar with every foot of the mighty cavern, directed the course.

For what seemed an interminable length of time they kept on.

Then, just as they were about to enter a narrow passage leading to a mighty chamber beyond, Waldo clutched Frank's arm with a sharp cry.

CHAPTER X.

PROGRESS CUT OFF.

"Hold on, Mr. Reade!" he exclaimed, "we are nearing dangerous ground."

The words were barely out of his mouth when there was a sudden crash of fire-arms and a storm of bullets came whistling about.

Of course no harm was done to those in the wagon.

But two of the ranchmen fell.

This was enough for Wiggin.

"Forward, men!" he yelled. "Lick the stuffing outen 'em."

With a cheer the ranchmen rode forward.

Down into the narrow passage they went. Another volley came, and for a moment the place was choked with downtrodden horses and men.

It had been a reckless move upon Wiggin's part.

But he had made it and there seemed no other way but to back it up.

Frank could not get ahead with the Steam Horse, but he sent the rays of the headlight through the passage so that Wiggin could see to get through.

The ranchmen went through and into the big chamber beyond.

But the outlaws dodged out of sight behind pillars and corners and picked off the invaders.

They had clearly the advantage.

Frank Reade, Jr., saw this, and also that something must be done at once to turn the tide of battle.

The passage was well cleared by this time.

He sent the Steam Horse through and across the big chamber.

Another narrow passage, leading into another chamber, was just ahead.

Frank drove the Horse through this.

Rifle balls were flying everywhere, but this was nothing to the inmates of the wagon.

They were safe from harm, and Barney and Pomp were kept busy with their rifles.

Here and there they got a shot at the foe, and in every case they made it tell.

The outlaws could not stand this; and sought safety in narrow corridors where the Horse could not follow.

"We have got them routed!" shouted Frank. "Now, Waldo, show us the way to the main cavern where the prisoners will be likely to be."

"All right," replied the young ranchman; "keep straight on!"

For some ways the Steam Horse pushed on from one cavern to another.

The outlaws were fleeing before them.

Suddenly Edson cried:

"Now we come to the ranch. See yonder light?"

The invaders did see it. They also saw a great crowd of armed men in the cavern chamber beyond.

"That is it! Now push forward and the victory is ours!"

Straight for the narrow passage leading into the underground ranch the Steam Horse went.

Frank Reade, Jr., was calculating his chances on getting through when a thrilling thing happened.

Suddenly there was a blinding flash, a terrific roar, and a shaking of the earth as if by an earthquake shock.

When this came the Horse was at great speed.

But Frank closed the throttle and applied the brake.

He was just in time.

As it was, particles of rock of great weight narrowly missed crushing the wagon and its occupants.

"Heavens!" gasped Edson. "What was that?"

The headlight of the Steam Horse lit up the cavern ahead.

And there was a plain revelation of all.

Nothing could be seen of the armed men or of the cavern chamber beyond.

The passage was completely walled up by the terrible explosion.

This was a trick of the outlaws to cut off the attack of the foe.

Undoubtedly a keg of gunpowder in a crevice of the cavern wall had done the whole mischief.

"They have cut us off!" cried Frank, in dismay. "That is hard luck!"

"Don't say anything about luck!" cried Edson. "What if we had been in that passage then?"

"Golly, I jes' finks dis chile wud hab been flattened out fo' suah," cried Pomp.

"Begorra, it's a narrow escape the same!" cried Barney.

"But if we had been a little quicker and got through," said Frank Reade, Jr., "how much better."

It was now a chilling situation to face.

The passage to the underground ranch had been cut off.

The outlaws certainly had the best of the situation now.

"Is there no other passage?" asked Frank, turning to Edson.

"Yes, sir," replied the young ranchman, "but the Steam Horse could not get through it."

What was to be done?

There seemed but one course to pursue now. This evidently was to strike out on foot and attempt to storm the underground ranch without the aid of the Steam Horse.

With this decision made, no time was lost in executing it.

A strong guard was left with the horses and the Steam Horse.

Pomp was left in the wagon and Barney accompanied Frank Reade, Jr., and young Edson this time.

The Celt was overjoyed with the privilege.

Pomp had his instructions and knew what to do in case of an attack.

Frank Reade, Jr., and Cal Wiggin led the way through the narrow passages leading into the underground ranch.

At every step they encountered resistance from the foe and it was necessary to fight every foot of the way.

The battle was now on more even terms, and the advantage by no means with the invaders.

Every foot of the distance was stubbornly fought.

A number of the ranchmen were shot, but this did not deter the others.

They were fighting to rid the country of a monster in crime, and they would not give up.

With such resolution and firm purpose they were bound to succeed.

The outlaws were slowly but surely driven back into the main chambers of the underground ranch.

"Hurrah!" cried Cal Wiggin. "Keep on, boys. We'll soon git into ther main cavern, an' then we'll clean 'em out!"

This enthused the invaders, and they pressed forward eagerly.

Soon the battle had become almost at close quarters.

The outlaws made a deadly resistance, but the ranchmen, with Wiggin at their head, made a desperate charge and drove the outlaws before them.

Scattered into various cavern passages, some of them surrendered.

Others kept up a desultory fight with the settlers.

But now the main chamber of the underground ranch had been cleared, and Waldo Edson took no further interest in the fight.

He thought only of his father and brother and Sis Wiggin.

He rushed from one cell to another, looking for the prisoners.

In one cell he found his father, a white-haired, stooping old man.

Job Edson, after a confinement of three years, came forth from his cell and fell weeping upon his son's neck.

Frank Reade, Jr., found Bert Edson in another cell, and also liberated him.

That was a wonderful and a touching meeting between the father and sons.

For three years they had been in captivity, facing death as it were, for the capricious will of Sid Rollins alone warding the grim monster off.

To meet now and be once more assured of freedom was a glimpse of Paradise to them.

The others turned from the touching scene without dry eyes.

But Cal Wiggin was in a frantic state of mind.

He had searched high and low for his beloved Sis.

But the girl captive could not be found. Indeed, not a trace of her seemed to exist in the underground ranch.

Poor Wiggin was frantic.

"I kain't understand that!" he cried. "How does it happen thet she ain't hyar? The cuss must have brought her hyar."

"Why, I should have thought so," agreed Frank. "Are you sure you have looked carefully everywhere?"

"In course I am."

"And you find no trace of her?"

"Not a bit!"

Frank Reade, Jr., was puzzled as well as the excited father.

But Frank was cooler than Wiggin and he began a calm search.

He did not go far before he found a clue.

In one of the cells he picked up a glove which had belonged to Sis. This was identified by Wiggin.

"In course that's her glove!" declared the irate parent, "but whar's ther gal?"

"Well," said Frank, with painful conviction, "I dislike to speak my mind!"

"Don't ye be afraid! Spout it right out. I kin stand it. Ye don't —ye don't think as how—she's dead?"

"Oh, no!" replied Frank, quickly, "but I think that Rollins has taken her away with him."

"Ah!" exclaimed Wiggin, drawing a deep breath. "Whar could he take her?"

"That is hard to say. I don't believe he would hide here in the cave!"

"Then ye think he's taken Sis an' skipped out completely?"

"Yes, that is it!"

"Well, now, whar has he gone?"

"That is for us to find out," declared Frank; "can't we do it?"

"We'll try!" roared Wiggin, rushing out into the main cavern.

"Hello, boys! all of ye cum with me!"

"Where are you going?" asked Frank.

"Going!" exclaimed the big ranchman. "I'm goin' ter scour every inch of territory in ther West but I'll find my gal Sis."

Before Frank could say a word more a startling sound came to the hearing of both.

It was the distant whistle of the Steam Horse.

"Heavens!" gasped Frank, "they have attacked the guard and we must hurry to their assistance!"

"Ay, ay!" cried Wiggin, excitedly. "All hands up!"

The ranchmen responded quickly and a return on the double-quick was made to the cavern where they had left the Steam Horse.

But arrived there a startling state of affairs was discovered.

The Steam Horse and Pomp were gone, as also the guard and many of the ranchmen's horses.

CHAPTER XI.

POMP MAKES A FOOL OF HIMSELF.

POMP, left in charge of the Steam Horse, had not the slightest idea of doing anything but faithfully obeying his master's orders.

He remained aboard the wagon for some while.

But after a time it became dull and irksome sitting there doing nothing.

It occurred to him that it would not be a bad idea to cultivate the transient acquaintance of some of the guard left by Wiggin.

There seemed not the least indication of danger about.

Satisfied of this, Pomp proceeded to make friendly overtures to the cowboys.

He had no trouble whatever in forming a quick friendship with them.

The fighting was over with them for the time being, and the ranchmen naturally looked for some relaxation.

One of them produced a poker deck.

This was enough.

In a jiffy half a dozen were reclining upon the ground engaged in the fascinating game.

The others were interested spectators, so that for a time all thought of impending danger was not in existence.

Pomp was inordinately fond of poker. His mouth watered as he watched the game closely.

"Golly! I reckon dem chaps jes' needs somebody fo' to show dem de principalities of de game!" he muttered. "I jes' believe dat I cud show dem dat."

The more Pomp became convinced of this the stronger grew his desire.

So he opened the door of the wagon and joined the gang.

"I jes' reckons dar ain' no manner ob use ob me stayin' in dat waggin," he muttered. "I clean git in dar quick enuff if de enlemy cums."

Convinced of this Pomp soon accepted an invitation to take a hand.

He did so.

His first venture was to win a jackpot. This gave him full confidence.

But somehow after that the cards seemed to go against him.

One cowboy bluffed him out of a hand, and the next time Pomp in trying to outbluff him discovered that he had four queens to his own full house, and groaned as the pile was raked away from him.

Then he lost the next jackpot, was raised ten points and lost, and altogether was getting badly used, when the game came to a sudden termination.

Suddenly the horses took fright and began to kick and tear about the cavern.

The cowboy guard were upon their feet in an instant.

But half of them were instantly shot down in the darkness. Then Pomp thought it time to take a hand.

He went into the wagon with a flying leap.

But close behind him was a powerful framed man with an object in his arms.

Revealed in the light this was seen to be the form of a young girl.

It was Sis Wiggin.

She was in a dead stupor, and the villain who held her in his arms was no other than Sid Rollins.

The villain had realized that his gang was broken up, and seizing his fair captive after a desperate struggle with her, he had managed to sneak hither with half a hundred of his followers.

He saw Pomp get into the wagon, and a daring idea entered his mind.

He instantly acted upon it.

With a leap he went in behind the ducky.

Pomp turned to face a revolver held at his head.

"Golly, fo' glory!" gasped the astonished ducky. "What am dat yo' want?"

"Listen, you bit of ebony!" cried the outlaw chief, savagely. "Don't you dare to refuse what I ask of you, or you die!"

Pomp gazed into the muzzle of the revolver in dismay.

The ducky was plucky enough.

But he had yet sense enough to see that the least move was likely to prove his deathknell.

His first impulse was to dodge the weapon and risk a combat.

But he saw the danger of this. His foe plainly had the drop on him.

"Now, you black rascal," cried Rollins, sternly, "I want you to start up your Steam Horse and take me out of this cave by the way you came in."

Pomp hesitated.

He was averse to obeying, and yet what could he do?"

"Massy sakes!" he groaned. "What ebber will Marse Frank fink ob me now? I jes' reckon he hab no mo' respec' fo' dis chile."

There was no alternative, however, but to obey his captor. So Pomp opened the throttle and sent the Steam Horse at a slow gallop on the back trail.

"Faster!" growled Rollins. "Faster, or yer die!"

Pomp opened the throttle wider.

The Steam Horse dashed along now as fast as was consistent with safety.

"Why don't ye go faster, curse ye!" roared the villain.

"Fo' de Lor's sake, it ain't safe!" protested Pomp.

Rollins saw that the darky was right enough in this, and he relapsed into silence.

Pomp never could have found his way out of the place.

But Rollins, in terse commands, directed him which way to go.

The Horse sped from one cavern chamber to another.

Suddenly there was a gleam of daylight ahead, which paled the glare of the headlight.

They were nearing the open air, and with this conviction there came to Pomp a chilling sense that serious consequences were at hand.

The darky could not forgive himself for his folly in joining the hand at poker.

"Massy sakes!" he groaned, inwardly. "Whenebber will dis chile git over being a bo'n fool! I'se ebery bit to blame fo' all dis, an' Marse Frank neber fo'gib me!"

This distressed Pomp more than anything else.

The outlaw chief, Rollins, seemed to greatly enjoy the novelty of the ride behind the Steam Horse.

"By Jupiter!" he cried, "this is quite a chariot, ain't it, nigger?"

Pomp dared not refuse to answer.

"It am a pretty good team," he answered.

"I think I will take it along with me as far as I go, and you too, you black imp. Mind, no treachery now, or I'll have the life of ye!"

"A'right, sah!"

Pomp was servile enough, but all the same his shrewd brain was at work.

"P'raps he done drap dat revolver pooty quick!" he reflected. "Jes' as suah as he does, him an' I will hab a leetle tussle."

At this moment the Steam Horse emerged into the outer air.

The outlaw pointed to the open plain as the course to take.

Pomp responded at once.

At this juncture the captive girl showed signs of returning consciousness.

Her eyelids quivered and she gave a deep sigh and opened her eyes. The villainous features of Rollins above her gave her a shock of unpleasant kind and she started up with a little scream.

She saw Pomp at the dasher, realized that she was in the Steam Wagon and that they were traveling at a breakneck pace.

Then she saw with the clearing of her senses that Rollins commanded the situation, and a gasping cry of terror escaped her lips.

"Where am I?" she gasped. "What is all this? You here?"

"Yes, my love, I'm here," declared the villain, simulating a mock tenderness. "Don't be afraid. No harm shall come to you."

He ventured to take her hand, but Sis drew it back with a sharp cry.

"Don't dare to touch me!" she cried, with flashing eyes. "Your presence defiles me enough."

The villain's eyes flashed with anger and resentment.

"Easy!" he gritted. "Don't drive me to desperation. You are my prisoner!"

"I realize that!" declared Sis, scornfully. "And nobody but a coward would make a prisoner of a woman."

Rollins only laughed at this.

"You are wild as a hawk just now," he declared. "But I'll tame ye yet."

Pomp had listened to all this, and the honest darky's blood boiled.

"Jes' wait till I gits one chance," he muttered. "If only dat rapescallion wud put down dat ar pistol."

But Rollins yet held the weapon in his hand.

He toyed with it carelessly and regarded his fair captive with evil eyes.

"Your gay young lover made his escape!" he hissed, tauntingly; "but that will avail him nothing, for he will never win you as he expected. I shall live to triumph over all my foes."

She did not reply.

Her breath came quick and short, and there was a deadly pallor in her face.

It seemed to her as if she must suffocate in the presence of the master whom she so loathed.

"Listen to my plans," continued the villain, calmly. "I mean to take you to South America with me. There we shall be safe beyond pursuit."

"I shall force you to marry me, and once won, I shall gain your love. I shall then be the happiest man in the world."

"Only think of it, *ma chere*, we will live like two turtle-doves in that foreign land, and nothing shall come between us. You are all mine!"

"I will swear to be your slave—to make you a princess! Now, will not this tempt you to bestow upon me your love?"

The girl's eyes flashed liquid fire, and she recoiled from the outlaw as from a poisonous serpent.

"Desist in your persecutions, Sid Rollins!" she said forcibly. "I will die before I will take you as my husband! Let this end all!"

"Then you will not be won?"

Sis would not reply.

"Curse you for an obstinate hussy!" gritted the villain.

He sprang up and seemed about to advance upon her.

But he changed his purpose and came to Pomp's side.

"Now! you black imp!" he gritted. "Show me how you run this machine. No treachery now, or I'll blow yer brains out."

"A'right," replied Pomp, coolly. "Jes' pnt yo' hands, bof of 'em, right on dat brake handle."

The villain obeyed.

In order to do it, however, he was compelled to return his revolver to his belt. It was the opportunity Pomp sought.

"Jes' hol' right on," said the wary darky. "Now when y' wants to stop de hoss do jes' so."

Swift as lightning Pomp leaped upon the villain, winding his long arms about him and crushing him to the bottom of the wagon. Then followed a terrible struggle.

CHAPTER XII.

POMP'S BATTLE.

THE discovery by Frank Reade, Jr., and his companions of the disappearance of the Steam Horse was a most startling one.

But Frank had quickly solved the mystery.

One of the wounded guards who had crawled into a corner for safety, now appeared and said:

"I kin tell ye all about it, pards."

"Wall, let's have it, then!" cried bluff Cal Wiggin.

The suffering man then narrated the whole affair.

When Frank heard that Rollins with Sis in his arms had got the best of Pomp, and had really got away with the Steam Horse, he was very angry.

"I'll give that darky a piece of my mind!" he cried, angrily. "Just let me get my hands on him!"

However, the situation was as described, and the question now was what was to be done?

"Why, go in chase of ther rascal!" cried Wiggin, furiously. "Just let me get hold of Sid Rollins, an' there'll be one less rascal in this territory, you bet."

A cheer greeted this remark.

The ranchman had been busy in looking for their scattered horses.

Many of these had been found, and a large part of the party were ready to ride forth.

But before this could be done there came the crack of rifles and three of the party fell.

Some of Rollins' men had hidden in the arches of the cavern and from their secure position were able to make a target of the ranchmen.

This would never do, and Cal Wiggin shouted:

"Charge on 'em, lads! Root 'em out, the hull on 'em!"

With a cheer the ranchmen went to the attack.

But the outlaws who seemed strongly intrenched held their ground well and a large sized battle was soon in active progress.

Cal Wiggin led the ranchmen with his accustomed intrepidity.

Into the farthest recesses of the cavern went the battle.

In vain the outlaws tried to resist the ranchmen.

Wiggin led them on so skillfully and with such pluck that the outlaws were forced to beat an ignominious retreat.

Having driven the gang into the farthest depths of the cavern Wiggin and his men returned.

"Now, Mr. Reade!" he cried, "we are ready to go ahead with you."

"All right!" cried Frank with alacrity, "every man to saddle. We will have to ride hard to overtake the Steam Horse!"

"Beggorra, we niver kin do it," declared Barney, "av the naygur is smart he'll niver let the Hoss out fer all he's wuth."

"Trust Pomp for that," cried Frank.

Waldo Edson and his brother and even the old man, who seemed too decrepit, rode with the leaders.

Waldo was the most familiar with the cavern and led the way.

The distance to the cavern exit was very quickly covered.

Dashing into the open air instinctively all looked for the Steam Horse.

But not a sign of it could be seen anywhere.

To the eastward what looked like a body of horsemen was seen.

These were in reality a part of the band of outlaws, who had seized some of the ranchmen's horses and escaped from the cave at the same time.

It was of no use to pursue them.

"What shall we do?" cried Waldo Edson. "We can't waste time here."

"Find ther trail!" suggested one of the ranchmen.

This certainly seemed like a proper move to make.

At once search for the trail was begun. It was a success.

The grooved tires of the steam wagon left a mark which it was easy to follow.

Taking the trail, it was not difficult to follow it with the eye at a gallop.

For over an hour the ranchmen rode on in silence.

Every keen eye, however, was upon the horizon line, and every object appearing there was closely scanned.

Nothing like the Steam Horse came into view.

But after a time six round topped buttes appeared in the distance like prairie sentinels.

The trail led in that direction.

Galloping swiftly the party of ranchmen now neared the buttes.

There was a feeling that when these should be reached something would turn up.

This premonition was verified.

Suddenly to the hearing of all there came the sound of firearms.

Then Wiggin gave a cry:

"Navajoes, as I'm a sinner!" he yelled.

At that moment a number of the mounted savages, with their long lances, were seen to gallop across an open space between the buttes. There was no doubt but that the Steam Horse had encountered the savages and a battle was in progress.

It was now a question as to whether Pomp or Rollins was making the fight, whether both were not making a common cause of it.

There was certainly sharp firing and Barney cried:

"Shure that's the naygur's rifle. Don't I know the sound av it?"

This might be true, but for all that, it might be Rollins instead of Pomp who was handling it.

But the doubt was quickly dispelled.

Suddenly the ranchmen rounded the base of one of the buttes and came upon the scene of battle.

And a lively scene it was.

The Steam Horse was backed up against the side of one of the buttes, and the Navajoes, over half a hundred in number, were pressing forward to capture it and the occupants of the wagon.

But one man was at one of the loopholes and Barney chanced to see his face for an instant.

"Hooray!" he cried. "It's the naygur. Shure he's safe."

Then with a wild cheer the ranchmen charged upon the Navajoes.

A lively battle was quickly in progress.

It was at this stage questionable as to which side would win it.

But let us return to the close of a preceding chapter where we left Pomp and Rollins in a desperate struggle for the mastery.

Down to the floor of the wagon fell the two contestants.

A struggle which baffles description then followed.

Terrified Sis Wiggin climbed upon one of the bunkers for safety.

All this while the Steam Horse was running at a terrific pace over the prairie floor.

There was no restraining hand upon the throttle rein, and the Horse kept its own course.

Fortunately the prairie was smooth and clear, else the result might not have been pleasant for the passengers.

The struggle between Pomp and Rollins was a terrific one.

The outlaw was a powerful man but Pomp was wiry and plucky as well.

Blow after blow Rollins rained upon Pomp's head.

But the darky did not heed them more than so many drops of water.

In vain Rollins tried to best him.

The villain made the air blue with his yells and curses.

But Pomp kept a steady pull and this told in the end.

Rollins gradually began to weaken, Pomp forced him backward to the floor of the wagon and held him there.

Sis Wiggin, on the wagon seat, had been earnestly praying for her champion's success.

This now seemed assured, and she was overjoyed.

"Golly, I done flink I hab got yo' now, Mister Outlaw," cried the plucky darky. "If yo' don't stop wiggling I'll sho' break yo' head fo' yo'."

"Curse ye!" gritted the brute. "Let me up, I say."

"Not jes now!" cried the darky. "Yo' jes bettah wait a lilly bit."

"Let me up!"

"Keep still or yo' get hurt."

The villain did keep still.

At that moment his head had chanced to strike the corner of the bunk, and this settled the question at once.

He did not move afterwards, having been reduced to insensibility.

This relieved Pomp greatly.

It enabled him to seize a rope and bind the villain's hands behind him.

He had barely time to do this when a startled cry escaped Sis's lips.

Pomp saw what was the trouble quickly and sprang to the dasher.

He quickly closed the throttle and brought the Horse down to a slower pace.

Directly in front of them was one of the six buttes.

The Horse had been going directly toward it, and there would surely have been a collision had Pomp not arrived at the dasher just in time.

The Steam Horse was allowed to pass between two of the tall buttes.

"Thank Heaven, sir, you have come off victorious!" cried Sis joyfully, as she came up to Pomp's side. "God has aided our course!"

"You're jes right Missy!" cried Pomp. "Dat was a werry bad man fo' to handle, but I jes flinks he won't truble us no mo'."

The Steam Horse now passed between the buttes and Pomp had begun to turn around so as to take the back trail when a startling thing happened.

Suddenly the pass between the two buttes was darkened by the appearance of a band of mounted Navajoes.

They were half a hundred in number and descended upon the Steam Horse like a whirlwind.

"Golly sakes!" cried Pomp, in consternation, "What ebber is I gwine fo' to do?"

It was a dubious question.

It did not look as if he could dodge the enemy, for they were directly in front of him and the butte was in his rear.

There was no time to lose.

Pomp was quick to act.

He brought the Steam Horse about and faced the foe.

Then he seized his rifle.

"Ki dar, yo' rapscallions!" he cried, excitedly. "Jes yo' keep off or on mah wo'd I makes you drefful sorry fo' it."

Then aiming at the foe Pomp blazed away!

His shots were effective.

Numbers of the Navajoes fell beneath his deadly aim.

But they did not cease to attack the Steam Horse, and pressing forward seemed likely to surround it.

Pomp was in a state of desperation.

He had begun to fear the worst when relief came in an unexpected manner.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE END.

POMP was just ready to believe that his end was at hand, when the settlers led by big Cal Wiggin and Frank Reade, Jr., dashed upon the scene.

A rattling volley was poured into the ranks of the savages.

This demoralized them and they began to fall back.

At that moment Pomp heard the cheering voice of his confrere.

"Aye there, naygur, howld on to the ship an' ye'll shurely be saved!"

Pomp raised his voice and yelled a reply:

"Don' yo' fret fo' dis child, I'ish, I'se gwine to stick to de las'!"

"Be jabers that's roight."

Sis Wiggin was beside herself with joy at sight of her father and friends so near.

To her it meant rescue and many other happy things. She was quite overcome with joy.

But the Navajoes were making a stubborn fight.

They did not seem disposed to give in at all.

They are a class of savages noted for great pluck and persistency.

In this respect they excel the Comanches.

But the settlers went at them hammer and tongs.

"Give it to 'em," yelled big Cal Wiggin. "Lick 'em hard and well."

Nothing was so inspiring to the settlers as big Cal's voice.

They emptied their repeaters, and then clubbing them, charged at the foe.

Nothing could withstand such a charge as that was.

The Navajoes in dismay broke ranks and were scattered.

A yell of victory went up from the white men.

But at this moment a thrilling incident occurred.

All the while the crafty villain, Sid Rollins, had been lying upon the floor of the wagon.

The shrewd scoundrel had regained his senses and was fully cognizant of what was going on about him.

He realized at once what his position was, and a feeling of dismay seized him.

He saw the band of settlers with big Wiggin at their head.

He knew well enough that to fall into their hands, meant a slip noose and a few feet of rope at the nearest tree.

Therefore, the villain was glad to accept any chance for his life.

By working upon his bonds he managed to free his wrists.

He waited a favorable opportunity. Then he sprang up like a panther and flung open the wagon-door.

Pomp had not time to check him. The villain leaped from the wagon and dashed along at the base of the butte.

It was possible that he might have escaped, but at that moment he chanced to meet a band of the Navajoes.

In a moment a circling lariat went out, and settled over his shoulders.

There was a chorus of yells, a stampede of horses, and away went the whole Navajo tribe across the prairie.

And behind them, dragging at the end of the lariat, was the lifeless, battered and miserable form of Sid Rollins.

The villain's career had terminated in a hideous manner. But there were few regrets in the crowd of spectators, though all felt a sense of horror.

The ranchmen did not attempt to pursue the Navajoes.

They had rescued Pomp and Sis and the Steam Horse, and this was enough. What a joyful meeting that was.

Cal Wiggin held the beloved form of his darling Sis in his arms once more. Waldo Edson stood near, waiting his turn to greet the girl he loved.

"We have seen ther enemy, an' they're ours!" roared Wiggin, in his cheery way. "We've licked 'em dead ter rights; hev wiped out Rollin an' his gang, but we never cud hev done it without Frank Reade, Jr., an' his new Steam Hoss. Three cheers for ther man an' his iron hoss!"

It is needless to say that they were given with a will. Then all started for Wiggin's ranch.

And so, gentle reader, ends this story of Frank Reade, Jr.'s trip to New Mexico.

The young inventor came in for no end of praise and gratitude from the citizens of Columbian City.

There was no doubt but that the fortunes of the settlers would now mend.

Job Edson and his sons could reclaim their famous underground ranch, and all felt assured of a boom in Columbian City.

As for Frank Reade, Jr., Barney and Pomp, they all returned to Readestown with the Steam Horse.

But their travels were not yet over, for Frank found there awaiting

him a motive for another marvelous trip, the full and thrilling details of which may be found in No. 11 of the FRANK READE LIBRARY, entitled:

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